

# **Breaking-up the 'Precariat': Personalisation, Differentiation and Deindividuation in Precarious Work Groups**

## **Abstract**

Much-debated and researched, the subject of precarious work remains at the forefront of academic and policy discourses. A development of current interest is the reported growth of employment flexibility and increase in non-standard and atypical work, regarded by some as contributing to the emergence of a class-like 'precariat' of insecure and marginalised workers. However, this precariat framework remain largely untested and underexplored. Therefore, using in-depth narratives from 77 semi-structured interviews with workers from groups within the precariat spectrum, we address this gap. Our study finds that cohesion within and between these groups is overstated, and worker collectivisation far from apparent. As a result, this diversity of group dynamics, attitudes and experiences challenges not only negative conceptualisations of the precariat in the literature, but the theoretical validity of the precariat framework itself.

**Key words:** precarious work, precariat, contact hypothesis, social identity, decategorisation, deindividuation

## **Introduction**

The perceived growth of 'precarious work', comprising of low-skill, low-pay and generally insecure jobs with no career prospects and limited worker protection (ILO, 2016) from being 'hired and fired at will' (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) has been the subject of significant academic and policy interest. Much of the debate revolves around reduced contractual rights, employment and income security, as well as the diminished

scope for workers in precarious employment to find meaning and fulfilment through work (Ojala et al., 2017; Standing, 2014a; Campbell and Price, 2016; Ferreira, 2016; Prosser, 2016; Siegmann and Schiphost, 2016; Wilson and Ebert, 2013). More specifically, it is argued that the growth of precarious work has created an insecure and alienated category of workers, described as a volatile 'precariat' (Standing, 2014; 2011; Di Fabio and Palazzeschi, 2016; Guichard, 2009). Exposed to such arbitrary dismissal, health and safety risks as well as bullying and harassment, the precariat's working experiences are not only regarded as predominantly negative but their relationships with and within work appear to be undermined by the lack of a stable, meaningful and fulfilling work identity (Standing, 2016; 2014b; 2011; Potter and Hamilton, 2014; Lea, 2013; Squires, 2013). Furthermore, the precariat is regarded as sufficiently unified to constitute a separate class (Savage et al., 2013; Savage, 2000), whose alienation and 'otherness' to the State can fuel protest, and provide the basis for rising populism (Armano et al., 2017; Pajnik and Campani, 2011; Standing, 2016).

In turn, Standing (2014a; 2014b; 2016) identifies three main paths to precarity and, consequently, three main groups of precarious workers, namely, 'atavists', 'nostalgics' and 'progressives'. Atavists are former working class members who have lost their access to secure or meaningful work and thus, lost their 'past'. Nostalgics are migrants and ethnic minority members who have left their home countries and, unable to find meaningful work in their new countries, lack a 'present'. Progressives are educated members of the precariat who do not have access to a career path, thus also lacking a 'future' (Standing, 2014a; 2014b). Despite intended as a high-level conceptualisation,

Standing's approach is problematic in seeking to bring together highly-disparate groups under the same denominator, whilst failing to show where the boundaries between the precariat and other, non-precarious groups lie (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). In turn, a number of studies have expressed doubt (Paret, 2016; Wright, 2016) over the claim that workers with such diverse characteristics, experiences and attitudes can form a unified class (Savage, et al., 2013), be it one 'in-the-making' (Standing, 2011:15). Nevertheless, the existence of a precariat is increasingly taken for granted and often without due empirical diligence (Armano et al. (eds.), 2017; Gilmore et al., 2017; Pajnik, 2016; Savage et al., 2013).

Such conceptualisation can lead to apparent anomalies, for instance, instances of precarious workers whose experiences diverge from the overarching alienation and insecurity of the precariat (Standing, 2011; Potter and Hamilton, 2014). The possibility of this occurring is, at times, acknowledged by the pro-precariat literature (Standing, 2011; McCollum and Findlay, 2015), yet tends to be dismissed as the result not of satisfaction or enjoyment, but of accepting their working conditions as the norm. This is not the fulfilment offered by meaningful work, but the forced adoption of an instrumental attitude towards precarious work and tolerating it as a 'means to an end' (Standing, 2014; Katungi et al., 2006) and a way to 'pay the bills'. Broader discussions of low-pay and low-skilled work also point to the importance of satisficing behaviours in explaining relatively high-levels of subjective job satisfaction (Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Svetlik, et al., 2005). However, they also suggest the need for a more nuanced analysis which takes into account the formation of 'in-group' norms and expectations in the context of gender, class

and capitalist production relations (Brown et al., 2012). Furthermore, in-group worker experiences and cohesion are contingent on a complex range of interconnected factors. Specifically, it is possible for shared employment conditions, for instance, level of pay and job security to be moderated by subjective considerations such as the perceived availability of manager support, social status and meaningful social relationships (Hebson et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2012; Mittal et al., 2009; Warr, 2007). This could open the door for diverse individual experiences even against broadly similar precarious contexts thus making the assumed coherence and class-like status of the precariat problematic and in need of further empirical validation.

It is surprising, therefore, that worker experiences and precariat cohesion have not been viewed through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Built on the premise that individual identities are both composite and formed through a person's membership of multiple social groups, SIT suggests that worker identification with the precariat is likely if their membership of a precarious work-group is both meaningful and fulfilling (Turner, 1986; Miller and Brewer, 1984). If this were the case, in-group membership could allow precarious workers to experience fulfilment despite the insecurity, risk and exploitation encountered in their day-to-day work and the stigmatised identity accorded by their employment circumstances (Standing, 2014a; 2011). However, if the in-group can be a significant moderator of the insecurity, anxiety and commodification of precarious workers (Standing, 2011; Lea, 2013; Squires, 2013), and if there are at least three types of precariat in-groups (atavists, nostalgics and

progressives), as identified by Standing (2014a; 2014b; 2016), why are positive experiences not reported more often?

Miller and Brewer's (1984) SIT-based modification of Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis offers a possible explanation. Specifically, Miller and Brewer (1984) argue that there are, in fact, not one but three different levels of in-group integration and cohesion, namely, 'categorisation', 'differentiation' and 'personalisation'. Thus, while categorisation reflects the level of in-group cohesion proposed by SIT and required for precariat unity, differentiation and personalisation indicate a move towards 'decategorisation'. In turn, decategorisation is a state where in-group members do not fully conform to the in-group category but display differentiated (that is, weakly-conforming to the in-group identity) and personalised (generally non-conforming to the in-group identity) behaviours and attitudes (Miller and Brewer, 1984:288-230). This explanation begs two further, more significant questions. If such differentiation among the experiences of individual precarious workers did occur, would members of the precariat frame their working experiences in the uniformly negative terms suggested above and, as a follow-on, would the precariat itself prove a salient conceptual category gluing precarious workers together?

We use narratives from 77 in-depth interviews with precarious workers in the South West of England in order to address these questions. Identifying the research population of category as complex as the precariat is challenging, and we proceed by combining two theoretical frameworks to assist us in drawing a sampling frame. We use a

representative, UK-wide study of class and occupations by Savage et al. (2013) to identify cleaners and carers as occupations over-represented in the precariat, and focus on migrant workers in line with Standing (2011; 2016). The intention of our article in doing so is not to deny the importance of regulating the structural context of precarity (Standing, 2011; ILO, 2016). Rather, we aim to move beyond assumptions of economic and employment contexts as determinants of worker experiences (Standing, 2016; Gilmore et al., 2017) in order to study the scope for nuances in precarious workers' experiences and, through this, the level of cohesion and salience of the precariat as a conceptual category.

The rest of article is structured as follows: first we set out the context of precarious work in contemporary labour markets, the utility of the in-group concept and the limitations of SIT in identifying such nuances in worker experiences. We then show how its shortcomings could be addressed through Miller and Brewer's (1984) decategorisation model, which we apply to current conceptualisations of the precariat. We move on to explain and discuss the methods used to gather and analyse the data as well as the broader methodological underpinnings of the research. We present our findings by outlining the group dynamics within three industries within the precariat spectrum (Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013). Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and draw conclusions regarding their impact on current theory.

## **Review of the Literature**

Although the subject of precarious work has generated continued interest, the experiences of people in precarious work remain a point of on-going contestation. A recent contribution to the literature on precarious work is Guy Standing's thesis, proposing the emergence of a precariat class, ushered in by the re-structuring of work and employment (Standing, 2011; 2014; Lestauskas and Stakenas, 2017; Franco, 2017; Hyman, 2018) and promulgated by disillusionment with unequal labour market access (Standing, 2016; Stiglitz, 2013). This is reflected in the notion of the 'hour-glass' labour market in Britain which offers an abundance of low-paid at the bottom and well-paid jobs at the top, but few career paths bridging this divide and suffering a deficit of opportunities to progress from the former to the latter (Goos and Manning, 2007; Sissons, 2011). This context is likely to leave precarious workers stranded in 'lousy' and 'bad' jobs at the bottom and prevent their progression to the meaningful and well-remunerated employment at the top (Campbell and Price, 2016; Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2016). This view accords precarious workers the status of outsiders (Emmenegger, 2012, 2009; Davidsson and Emmenegger, 2012), whose position is propagated by weak labour regulation, limited worker protection legislation and reduced access to trade union representation (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Greer, 2016; Prosser, 2016). Such employment arrangements arguably produce a predominantly negative array of experiences such as commodification, insecurity, stress and uncertainty (McCollum and Findlay, 2015; Standing, 2011).

While the literature recognises the existence of nuances in individual worker experiences, it suggests that the disruptive impact of precarity is common to all.

Precarious workers are commodified and alienated as their lives are displaced, re-organised and rationalised around work, work-seeking activities (Standing, 2011; Antunes , 2013; Harvey et al., 2016; Gilmore et al., 2017), unpredictable employer scheduling, globalised market forces and austerity (Mas and Pallais, 2016; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Hyman, 2018). Although the levels of insecurity may vary across different precarious groups, insecurity and uncertainty are likely to be shared by many and familiar to all. These experiences have led to precarious workers' gradual collectivisation into a class of insecurity-sharing denizens who are an Other to the State (Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013) and increasingly capable of engaging in populist protest (Standing, 2016; Schlembach, 2016; Mattoni, 2016; Armano et al. (eds), 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that while for Standing (2011) the precariat is not yet a fully-fledged class, others (Pajnik, 2016; Savage et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2017) regard it as having already acquired class status. Albeit not universally-accepted, this conceptualisation of the precariat as a collective of social denizens, disadvantaged, economically marginalised, trapped in low-paid, temporary jobs (Emmenegger, 2012) and unable to form meaningful engagement with work is significant. In presenting precarious work as 'bad', 'lousy' and 'dirty', pro-precariat theorists have constructed an identifiable category of work, sufficiently differentiated (Tajfel , 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Miller and Brewer, 1984) from other social groups and exposed to multiple employment, income and contract-duration insecurities (ILO, 2016; Standing, 2011:10-14, Potter and Hamilton, 2014). In turn, Standing (2014a; 2014b; 2016) argues that three specific groups can be identified in the precariat, which are formed, and bounded by the composite impact of



these multiple insecurities and shared by all group members. Those groups are 'atavists', 'nostalgics' and 'progressives' whose precarious circumstances differ, yet who collectively share a predominant sense of insecurity and uncertainty (Standing, 2014a; 2014b). Atavists are former working-class members who have lost their jobs and their *past* as major industries declined. Atavists are also likely to be drawn to populist views and agendas (Standing, 2015; 2016). Nostalgics are migrants who lack a sense of belonging in their adopted homelands and miss a sense of the *present*, leading a mostly passive existence as strangers in a strange land. Progressives are educated members of the precariat, perhaps even recent graduates, who are dissatisfied with their status and their lack of a *future* on account of absent career paths (Standing, 2014a; 2014b; 2016). Regardless of the nuances in individual journeys into precarity and apparent between-group differences (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) members of the atavist, progressive and nostalgic groups appear bound by the structural insecurities they encounter and share, as well as the group identity into which they partake (Standing, 2011).

Thus, since precarious groups are also segregated from non-precarious groups (Wright, 2016; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) through their **low-paid employment contexts and** marginalised, economic 'outsider' status (Emmenegger, 2009), precarious groups can also be identified as in-groups (Turner and Oakes, 1986; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1974; Turner and Oakes, 1986; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1974). This is significant as it suggests that even without accepting the existence of a precariat class, we can expect to encounter a certain type of everyday dynamics and

relationships among workers in precarious groups. Thus, although in Standing's (2011:15) conceptualisation individual precarious workers are non-homogeneous, they are nevertheless likely to conform to the identities of their respective, precarious groups. In turn, SIT views individual behaviours and attitudes as resulting from individual participation in a salient social group or 'category', and its group identity. Furthermore, individuals join social groups by self-categorising (opting) in an in-group based on perceived common characteristics and/or experiences (Turner et al., 1994). Such membership is also relational and has the potential of not only causing the individual to differentiate between their in-group and other, 'out-group' categories, but treat the former with positive bias in comparison with any out-groups. In fact, the presence of an out-group can further galvanise the in-group's external boundary and make the category a salient determinant of individual perceptions and attitudes (Miller and Brewer, 1984:284; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007; Haslam et al., 2004; Hogg and Terry, 1992).

However, the variation of experiences among low paid and low skill workers (Paret, 2016; Capasso et al., 2016; Chamberlain et al., 2016; Hebson et al., 2015; Chiappetta - Swanson, 2005; Stacey, 2005; Findlay et al., 2013; Benjamin and Matthias, 2004) suggests that precarious workers' membership of an in-group and subsequent acceptance of its negative attitudes and behaviours should not be taken for granted. This scope for variance and heterogeneity is recognised in a number of studies (Wright, 2016; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormich, 2017) yet SIT is unable to account for this because it regards the in-group as cohesive and deindividuated, always uniting the experiences and attitudes of individual members. Therefore, to extend our analysis, we propose a

synthesis of SIT provisions and Miller and Brewer's (1984) SIT-inspired reconceptualisation of Group Contact Theory, a theoretical framework which treats in-group dynamics in a more nuanced way. Born of the need to understand early 20<sup>th</sup> century group conflict in the US such as race-based clashes in Detroit (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), Allport (1954) and subsequent research has focused on the aspect of intergroup conflict and the identification of optimal conditions under which it can be minimised (Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). In turn, Miller and Brewer's (1984:286-290) model is a subsequent iteration, which considers the possibility of three different types of in-group coherence. First, and in line with SIT, is categorisation, where the in-group is a salient category and has a dominant formative impact on individual identity, attitudes and behaviours. Categorisation is the result of deindividuation, where social group members divest themselves of their individual identities and take on a collective identity, allowing the 'I' to become 'we/us' (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; McGuire, 2007; Hogg, 1992). Second, and moving towards differentiation from the in-group, is decategorisation where individual attitudes are not fully compliant with the dominant sentiments of the in-group. In the instance of decategorisation the majority of each group's members would still adopt the overarching social identity, behaviours and attitudes of, for instance, atavists, progressive and nostalgics, but the alignment would be much looser and some individuals may fully decategorise and reject the group identity altogether. Third, and last, is the possibility of personalisation where there is individual awareness of the in-group category, yet the latter has all but lost its salience. In this case the in-group is only tenuously recognised and individual adherence to its values and attitudes is likely to be weak (Miller and Brewer, 1984:286-290; Brown, 2000).

The possibility for different levels of in-group integration lead us to formulate the following research questions for our study. Specifically, we ask if there can be different levels of cohesion within groups of precarious workers and, if so, whether these differences can contribute to different experiences and attitudes towards precarious work, challenging the theoretical coherence of the precariat construct and weakening its explanatory power.

## **Method**

Our study considers in-group dynamics across three different types of precarious work as identified by Savage et al. (2013) and Standing (2011), and provides empirically-substantiated findings through in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with 77 precarious employees. We sought to interview a large number of precarious participants in order to discover their rich and diverse sensemaking and also in the hope of capturing a variety of different voices and narratives (Gioia et al., 2012) of precarious work. Our original intention was to engage with members of Standing's (2014a; 2014b; 2016) conceptual categories, yet this proved both impractical and problematic. As an example, although Standing offers high-level conceptualisation of the three categories, he does not establish convincing internal or external group boundaries. Despite presenting them as in-groups of workers who share similar attitudes, Standing's categories are ambiguously broad, as exemplified by the identification of migrants and ethnic minorities (Standing, 2016) as nostalgics. This poses practical issues to researchers, since the circumstances of a migrant in highly-skilled or specialised work cannot be equated with the plight of a

migrant with basic language and professional skills in entry-level employment. Furthermore, atavists could not be tested for populist tendencies since it is engaging in populist movements which arguably galvanises and brings the category into being, rather than it being *a priori* formed (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017).

Thus, to capture the experiences of the latter group of migrants we approached agricultural workers who were likely to be in typically precarious jobs, with low employment security, limited or no access to trade union representation, low wages and reduced access to training (Vosko, 2010; Standing, 2011; 2014; ILO, 2016). In line with the purposive sampling design (Teddle and Yu, 2007) of our study, we contacted large farms in the South West of England and carried-out interviews with ten of the workers, both on and off site. We also contacted three Facebook groups run by Police Community Support Teams which offered advice to migrants in the UK. We placed a message with each group administrator and invited participants to come forward and discuss their experiences of life and work in the UK. This brought our migrant sample to N = 18 with participants being interviewed in a mix of face-to-face settings, by telephone and Skype. In addition to agriculture, a number of our migrants worked in the care and construction industries, which were further identified by Savage et al. (2013) as typically precarious work sectors.

Another precarious category identified in Savage et al.'s (2013) UK-representative study was that of cleaners. Thus, we approached 'Cleanwell', a large international organisation in the area, which was contracted to provide cleaning services for a local

military base. We were granted access to the base and were able to interview N=24 Cleanwell employees, having signed a non-disclosure agreement, and agreed that we would not report any of the personal characteristics of our respondents. As a result, we anonymised all personal demographic data and identify Cleanwell workers only through a number, role and squadron interview group membership. Furthermore, as we were unable to record the demographics for one of our groups we decided could not include them in our analysis for all groups. Nevertheless, fitting cleaners in one of Standing's (2014a; 2014b; 2016) categories was problematic. A large number of workers (N=21) had previously held jobs in industry and, following job loss, retirement or semi-retirement now worked for Cleanwell due to the perceived absence of any other work in the area. This suggested they were a potential fit with Standing's atavists. However, the remaining N=3 participants were younger workers who lacked the qualifications, experience or skills to secure other employment making them an in-between group which, like the progressives lacked a future and yet were neither well-educated, nor experienced.

The last precarious work category we chose was that of care work, identified by Savage et al. (2013) on account of the likelihood for care workers to be in short-term contracts. All participants in this group were employed on zero-hour contracts and paid a minimum wage, despite on-going requirements to keep their health and safety and work-policy training up-to-date by taking on-line courses in their spare time and attend work meetings outside of working hours. However, since neither Savage et al. (2013) nor Standing (2011) identify a particular type of care work, we interviewed both adult care and childcare workers. Specifically, this participant group consisted of N = 11 adult care

workers from a large, private adult care facility in the South West of Britain which provides care for both residential and mental health patients. In addition we approached N=24 childcare workers, also from a private provider and working with children under four years of age, some of which had special educational needs, which required child care staff looking after them to be qualified up to a Master's level.

Sixty-six hours of interviews were conducted and aimed at constructing narratives of precarious work through three main themes of enquiry addressing; 1) reasons for coming to the UK (for migrant worker group); 2) experiences at work and outside of it; 3) their long-term employment plans. All interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed professionally, using an intelligent verbatim style. In an effort to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of what precarious work means for our participants, we chose 'meaning condensation' (Kvale, 2013) a phenomenological method of analysis (Sokolowski, 2000), which enabled us to start with individual 'parts' of the precarious experience, as presented in worker narratives, and gradually construct the meaning of the phenomenon's 'whole'.

In line with the meaning condensation method, we carried out initial coding of all references to the work experience, using phrases with stand-alone meaning in the participant narratives as the coding category. We did not deploy existing codes but allowed them to emerge from the narratives by starting with the 'natural meaning units' in the data, gradually clustering them to form overarching themes describing the essence of that individual's precariousness against the context of the employment structures in which

it occurred. Initially, primary coding was carried-out by the lead author and shared with the other two authors in order to standardise the approach. The lead author then proceeded to complete all coding in NVIVO before sharing the codes with the other authors for final review and adjustment. Our choice of method was made with the intention of capturing the whole range of work-related experiences presented in individual narratives and focus group discussions, rather than limit our attention to negative experiences (Dowling, 2007; Holloway, 1997).



Table 1 – Breakdown of sample

| Group                              | N  | Gender Profile                  | Nationality  | 1st Order Codes  | Aggregate Theme |
|------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------|--|--|-----------------|
| 'Nostalgics'                       | 18 | Male N = 12<br><br>Female N = 6 | Bulgarian N = 5<br>Lithuanian N = 3<br>Romanian N = 3<br>Polish N = 1<br>Lithuanian N = 1<br>Romanian N = 2<br><br>Bulgarian N = 3 | Work to buy a car<br>Work to buy a house<br>Work to help family<br>Work to start a business back home<br>Work to gain experience<br>Work in Britain to avoid working at home<br>Work to avoid going back home<br>Work to build a life in Britain | Personalisation |
| 'Atavists'                         | 24 | Male N = 6<br><br>Female N = 18 | British N = 24   | Camaraderie with the Forces<br>Work for Forces, not Cleanwell<br>No choice, the only job round here<br>Pride of doing own bit with the forces  | Differentiation |
| 'Progressives' (Childcare Workers) | 24 | Female N = 24                   | British N = 24   | Part of something in this job  | Deindividuation |
| 'Progressives' (Adultcare Workers) | 11 | Male N = 2<br>Female N = 9      | British N = 35   | I love it here<br><br>Feels like a family  |                 |
| Total                              | 77 |                                 |  |  |                 |

## Findings

*'I'm here to buy a car/save/gain experience' - personalisation among migrants*

A common thread in the narratives of the migrants we interviewed was the instrumental attitude towards employment (Katungi et al., 2006). For our migrant participants, work became the solution to a range of material problems and a path away from the constraints of their socio-economic circumstances. Migrants in our sample were aware of the financial opportunities in Britain, as well as the gap between wages in their native countries, and British wages. Migrant participants assured us that although they were in low-skill work and paid a minimum wage, they were still earning three to four times the wage they received at home. Consequently, their narratives were imbued with a sense of success, potential and opportunity, which was nevertheless framed relationally, in comparison with the living standards of friends and family at home and the expectation that enduring temporary hardship will pay-off in the long run. Thus, not only was the sense of a missing 'present' (Standing, 2016) not detected among migrant narratives, but there were multiple 'presents' constructed and rationalised in narratives across our sample.

*"It would take me a month at home to earn what I can earn here in a week. After tax I make about £400-£450 in a week." (Anton, Male, Field Worker, Lithuania)*

*"I need money, this is why I am here, I need money and that is why I have been here for the past three years. Here I could earn triple or quadruple the amount I was earning at home." (Janush, Male, Factory Packer, Romania)*

*"I came here for the money. I can get more for a week here than I could for a month in Romania." (Yakim, Male, Fork-Lift Driver, Romania)*

At the same time, respondents did not appear to be concerned with the plight of other migrants, nor communicated a sense of membership to an overarching community, whether a nostalgics in-group, or otherwise. Furthermore, participant narratives failed to communicate a sense of explicit, or implied precarity at all. Workers in this sample had individual aspirations which were formed and in existence prior to their arrival in the UK, and their attitudes did not appear influenced by the precarious in-groups they were supposed to have entered and belong to, following their arrival in Britain. Thus, migrant narratives indicated a high degree of personalisation (Brewer and Miller, 1984) and suggested that Standing's (2014a) precariat concept had low salience for participants in this category. As an example, one of the core themes was the ability to earn money to either send back to their family overseas or to save in order to provide a better lifestyle for themselves on their return home. We could not detect the commitment to a populist agenda, lamentation for a lost past or missing future opportunity anticipated by Standing (2011):

*"I work in the fields, it is tough, it is a tough job but I earn a lot more money than I would in Lithuania. I am focused, though, I will earn enough and go back. I will have enough to get married and start a family" (Aram, Male, Field Worker, Lithuania)*

*"I came here from Poland ten years ago, just for the money, just to help my family at home. This is pretty normal over there." (Peter, Male, Forklift Driver, Poland)*

*"Everyone is here for a set period of time, you are here to earn money and not to have fun. It's ok, though, you could work six months in the year, then go back home and buy a car, a house or simply not worry about working for the rest of the year. When the money runs out, you do it over again." (Maria, Female, Cleaner, Bulgaria)*

In contrast, others saw the UK as having the potential for greater opportunities for themselves and their children. These participants also underscored their willingness to spend their time in Britain working and earning, following an individualised path away from the expected behaviours of a given category of precarious workers.

*“I am able to work in the field until early afternoon and then I go to college, where I am completing an IT qualification and will eventually start my own computer-repair business.” (Rinat, Male, Field Worker, Romania).*

*“The main reason for coming to the UK is to help my children so that when they grow up they can speak English, and hopefully there is a future for them in the UK because there isn’t one in Bulgaria. (Evgeny, Male, Builder, Bulgaria)”*

These variations further highlighted migrant workers’ personalised interactions (Miller and Brewer, 1984) and tendency to construct their attitudes, behaviours and perceptions without referring to a precarious in-group as a validating frame of reference. The similarity of instrumental sentiments in migrant worker narratives did not lead to a shared sense of purpose, nor produced an awareness of belonging to a category of work, despite the homogeneity of low-pay, low-skill and low-security employment positions apparently reserved for them. Although the opacity of Brexit made long-term planning difficult, participants did not rule out the possibility of frequent returns to Britain, for up to half-a-year at a time, in order to replenish savings. Yet, in those instances, earning enough money was not always goal in itself but could serve as a vehicle towards other business and life aspirations, ranging from accruing venture capital and starting a business, to supporting elderly parents. Even in instances where workers came to Britain in order to help their families financially, the narratives, beliefs and expectations differed. Thus, although migrant workers in our sample shared similar employment contexts, their

narrated experiences and attitudes were highly-individualised, and frequently offered positive constructions of their current conditions and experiences, which were at odds with negative conceptualisation of the precariat as suffering from insecurity, uncertainty, anxiety and anomie (Standing, 2014a; 2014b).

*Cleanwell vs managers, Forces vs Officers – differentiation in cleaners*

Participants in our cleaning sample also fit in the conceptual boundaries of Standing (2011) and Savage et al.'s (2013) interpretation of the precariat. Cleaners we interviewed admitted that working for Cleanwell was a necessity, rather than a choice due to the limited range of employment opportunities in the South West, a remote and mostly rural part of England. Participants in this group seemed to berate the lack of well-paid employment opportunities and frequently told us, like Participant 4, Squadron 3, that Cleanwell itself was not as good 'as it used to be'

*"The reason that we are here is because Cleanwell is the biggest employer in this area, most people can't drive so you have got the added advantage of a bus bringing you in to work. (Participant 2, Squadron 2)"*

*"You haven't got that many [work] opportunities down here, there isn't any industry (Participant 1, Squadron 2)"*

*"It [Cleanwell] is not what it used to be. If I could sum up my working life here it would be as 'disappointment'. (Participant 4, Squadron 3)"*

Cleanwell paid minimum wages to all staff, yet this was not a major theme in employee narratives. Instead, one of the main points of participant dissatisfaction was that employees' opinions and concerns were frequently ignored, even when expressed during personal development reviews and team meetings. Thus, workers were forced to

put up with changes to contracts and procedures even in those cases where the change was detrimental to their work and hindered their daily activities.

*“They changed the cleaning materials without asking us [staff]. I have tried the new chemical on my floors and it doesn’t [work], in fact that floor will get worse [damaged] but it’s not my problem. (Participant 4, Squadron 1)”*

Importantly, and similar to our migrant group, Cleanwell workers did not express populist views, did not appear to sympathise with far-right politics, nor seemed dejected on account of either a lost past or missing future, as per the range of characteristics Standing (2014a; 2015) proposes. Rather, participants in the cleaner group preferred to comply, rationalising this compliance simply. Thus, we were told that having a job was useful, even more, it was *necessary* and this was ‘the only job around’. This sentiment did seem close to the notion of ‘satisficing’ in the literature (Simon, 2013), that is, seeking to do the bare minimum in order to get by and not get picked-on by management and supervisors. As an example, workers spoke of trying to ‘navigate’ their tasks in the quickest and easiest way possible, with the minimum of effort and avoiding all unnecessary interaction with managers and supervisors.

*“They don’t listen to me, so why should I bother? I do things they way I feel is best. (Participant 3, Squadron 1)”*

*“I navigate myself around these things so I can do all the things I am supposed to do, it’s about finding the easiest way to do your job (Participant 2, Squadron 3)”*

However, this sample also highlighted complex and decategorised (Miller and Brewer, 1984) in-group dynamics, depending on who the workers referred to, Cleanwell as a whole, or individual managers. Thus, individual employees were able to differentiate (Miller and Brewer, 1984) from the generally negative in-group treatment of Cleanwell as

an organisation, and build respect and rapport with particular Cleanwell managers. Specifically, workers were more likely to exhibit goodwill towards those managers willing to reciprocate it, for instance, by agreeing to staff requests for leave or not interfering in staff day-to-day tasks. In these cases, respondents were more positive about their working experiences:

*“We can speak to our bosses easily, you can relate to them (Participant 5, Squadron 4)”*

*“My Boss is a friend. (Participant 1, Squadron 1)”*

In a similar way to the differentiation distinction between Cleanwell as a homogenous and remote out-group and individual managers, participants in this sample treated the Forces as an idealised and aspirational in-group, yet showed differentiated attitudes towards individual Officers. Cleanwell workers operated at a military base, at close quarters with military personnel, so the positive impact of daily contact with members of the Forces was a common theme, expressed by interview participants from the outset. Cleanwell workers respected the work of the Forces and a number of Cleanwell workers saw themselves as belonging to the Forces' in-group which was a source of status, prestige and meaning.

*“It’s a good place to work, you have to separate who you work for, I work for the Forces, not Cleanwell. (Participant 1, Squadron 3)”*

*“You see on the news some of things the Forces go through and what they are doing for our country, so when you are working in a place like this you feel proud that you are doing your bit [for the country], too! (Participant 5, Squadron 4)”*

*“The Forces guys very rarely refer to us as ‘the cleaner’ they will call us by name if they know us, and will say that the first person they miss is the cleaner! (Participant 1, Squadron 4)”*

Membership of the Forces’ in-group motivated Cleanwell workers to perform to the best of their abilities. Employees took pride in what they did and enjoyed the opportunity of doing at Cleanwell. Statements such as the below were frequently interspersed across participant narratives:

*“I like my job (Participant 1, Squadron 1)”*

*“I am good at my job (Participant 3, Squadron 2)”*

*“I like what I do and I do it to the best of my ability (Participant 2, Squadron 3)”*

*“I enjoy my job and I do it to the best of my ability. I do it to my standard and I feel my standard is as high as I will ever make it. I do it for me and the Forces. (Participant 1, Squadron 4)”*

However, there were strict policies governing the contact and communication with Officers and Cleanwell employees were not able to approach, or speak to Officers unless spoken to first. This led to the occasional narrative of dissatisfaction and even embarrassment. Interviewees from Squadron 2 and Squadron 4 claimed that at times, senior Forces personnel placed additional, even unreasonable demands on Cleanwell staff, treating the latter with disrespect or condescension.

*“Commanders and senior officers don’t wanna talk to the cleaner. This can be humiliating, like back to Victorian times... they don’t wanna see the servant downstairs (Participant 4, Squadron 4)”*

*“I was about to clean [an officer’s] room as scheduled but he wouldn’t let me in. He said, ‘no, can you come back’. I explained I was very busy today and I have to prioritise my work and I will do my best to come back, I did manage to get back because*



*I know what he is like, but on a survey he wrote down 5 pages moaning about that. I used to really enjoy my job...(Participant 1, Squadron 2)”*

Thus, the Cleanwell sample showed a complex dynamic within and across groups. There was a generally negative view of the Cleanwell out-group, yet instances of positive differentiation towards Cleanwell managers. In turn, the Forces were idealised as an aspirational in-group, yet cleaners showed negative differentiation towards individual Officers. These instances of differentiation showed that, although cleaners in our sample did not show awareness of, or pledge allegiance to a wider, class-like precariat, they had a sense of in-group membership, perhaps on account of being brought together by Cleanwell and its organisational structure, within which they operated. However, in broad similarity to our personalised migrants, the narratives of cleaners in our sample did not suggest ‘deindividuated’ levels of in-group cohesion, nor the consistent adoption of an in-group identity over individual ones (Miller and Brewer, 1984; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

*“This is Like My Second Family” – deindividuation in care workers*

In turn, the in-group cohesion reflected in narratives, experiences and attitudes of carers in our sample appeared greater than from both the migrant, and the Cleanwell group. Furthermore, participants in the carer group were much more likely to narrate instances where the in-group category was a salient determinant of their own experiences and attitudes. However, there were two significant qualifiers. First, the in-group was defined in a narrow, local and work-based context rather than as part of a wider precariat identity. Second, this work-based in-group identity was galvanised by the perception of Government, as regulatory and disruptive out-group, and client families, as a

homogeneous group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) with whom contact was kept to a minimum. While migrants chose to come to Britain freely but appeared to have little control over the role in which they found themselves, and while Cleanwell employees felt they had no choice, carers in our sample often actively pursued entry into care work.

*“I love working here, ever since school I knew this was the route for me. (Mia, Female, Childcare Worker)”*

*“This is something I’ve always wanted to do, since I was 8 years old. (Ana, Female, Childcare Worker)”*

*“I always enjoyed working in a nursery, I love it in there, I love the little ones. (Keira, Female, Childcare Worker)”*

Although care workers in the sample had relatively limited alternative job opportunities within the local labour market, respondents spoke not only of their active choice to work in the sector, but awareness of the resulting sense of enjoyment, fulfilment and satisfaction through engaging in a job which was fun. Moreover, the two private employers enabled their carers to up-date or gain new care qualifications in the course of their employment. Whilst this was no more a route out of precarious work than, for instance, the training a heavy goods vehicle driver had to complete in order to obtain a license, it was a necessary pre-condition in order to remain in work, or secure future employment. Although in part legalistic and put in place to ensure employers were compliant with Government regulations, the opportunity to train and up-skill further enabled workers’ sense of growth and meaningfulness achieved through work. Interestingly, this group’s narratives were both focused on the ‘now’, as Amber put it below, and did not show concern with a missing future or disillusionment with a lost past, again as proposed by Standing (2014a; 2016). There was no expressed or implicit need

to adopt a populist orientation in order to resist the plight of their present circumstances since, although precarious (Savage et al., 2013), our participants viewed care work as more than a stop-gap occupation and not just a 'means to an end'.

*"In this job I am happy, so no immediate future plans. It's funny because even my husband's said it, he said, 'you know you seem happier you seem content' (Amber, Female, Adultcare Worker)"*

*"I don't plan to leave here, I have gone from job to job and I can honestly say that this is the one job where I would not even think about moving and I have worked a lot of places (Simon, Male, Adultcare Worker)"*

In turn, the integration and cohesion of the carer in-group was enabled by the presence of two groups of 'Others', the Government and clients. Carers viewed both as homogenised and undifferentiated out-groups, and engaged with them in a deindividuated way (Miller and Brewer, 1984). Accordingly, the Government was viewed as the source of policy and regulations care employees did not always understand, or agree with. This was indicated by the almost unilaterally disparaged need for 'doing paperwork'.

*"I'm in the job for the care, definitely for the paperwork (Joanne, Female, Childcare Worker)"*

*"...then there's the paperwork...(Megan, Female, Childcare Worker)"*

*"...the paperwork makes you feel like a cog (Dana, Female, Childcare Worker)"*

*"I am often up late catching-up on paperwork (Susannah, Female, Adultcare Worker)"*

*"[I] come in on my days off to get the paperwork side all up to date (Susan, Female, Adultcare Worker)"*

In turn, the client out-group was established through professional boundaries, placed between the carers themselves and the families of children and adults they looked after. This was shared in an early comment from the manager of the childcare facility whose staff we interviewed, and who mentioned that her employees were 'strictly prohibited' from forming relationships with family members beyond those of everyday, work-based exchanges when children were picked-up or dropped-off. Thus, while both childcare and adult care workers knew by the name the children or adults they looked after, their family members were addressed through the neutral, anonymised and homogenised label of 'Mum' or 'Dad'.

Significantly, the scope for choice and presence of out-groups as consolidating forces meant that care work seemed to offer workers an opportunity to adopt and consolidate a professional social identity through membership in colleague in-groups. Therefore, this membership of care in-groups, was a salient determinant of individual values and attitudes but also a source of happiness and fulfilment. Accordingly, care workers like John spoke of being 'able to contribute to society', as well as having a positive impact on the lives of those they cared for. Perhaps as a result, the emotive description of care work as an occupation did not contain the differentiated elements of satisficing which appeared in Cleanwell narratives, nor the personalised instrumentality of migrants.

A particularly strong indication of this was the frequent description of work-colleagues as a 'family' which suggested an underlying perception of colleagues as a homogeneous and deindividuated (Miller and Brewer, 1984) in-group. This sentiment

appeared to be promulgated by the support given to, and reciprocated by managers and colleagues, perhaps unsurprising given the 'caring' and feminised context in which workers operated. Thus, care was practiced not only towards the children and adults who were receiving it, but towards colleagues, narrowing the gap in professional relationships and transforming the professional context into the narrated, 'family' experience.

*"In this job, I feel like I am part of something. I always say to [nursery manager], 'this is like my second family', because we all get on so well, I've gained so much confidence and making friendships as well, made some really good friends. (Rebecca, Female, Nursery Worker)"*

*"Working here feels like a big family, yeah. (Harriet, Female, Childcare Worker)"*

*"I love it. I love everything, the people I work with, the children, I couldn't wish for a better boss she is a friend (Clare, Female, Childcare Worker)"*

*"I think it's [the job] amazing, the support and the job satisfaction I get out of it, and being able to go home knowing that I have made someone else's day better, makes me feel better about myself... People think that if you're a care worker you wipe bums for a career, but I am here to make lives better. Yes, there are some...physical...aspects of the job but there is so much more. (Josh, Male, Care Assistant)"*

The presence of these themes in our participants' interviews suggested that the care group was the only one in our sample which offered instances of 'deindividuation' (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Miller and Brewer, 1984), thus enabling the social identity of the in-group to become a salient determinant of individual experiences and attitudes. However, it was also possible for individual workers not to accept the in-group and, indeed, in the process of arranging interviews, the senior managers of both care organisations commented on how staff who did not 'fit' in the group were quickly managed out. This process of attrition, where members left the group in instances of missing

individual-group 'fit' (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Schneider, 1978) seemed to reinforce the 'ingroup' identity and protect its integrity over time.

## Discussion

The aim of our study was to go beyond the assumed existence of a class-like precariat (Standing, 2011; 2014a; 2015; Savage et al., 2013; Armano et al. (eds.), 2017; Gilmore et al., 2017) and empirically study the dynamics, cohesion, attitudes and experiences of three groups of precarious workers. This is a matter of particular significance, given the mounting criticism (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017; Paret, 2016; Wright, 2016) against the tendency to accept the precariat's existence and conceptual validity as a *fait accompli*. Accordingly, our study adopted a bottom-up approach in order to capture a wide range of voices (Gioia et al., 2012) from migrants, cleaners and carer groups which the literature (Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013) places within the precariat spectrum.

As a result, we encountered a broadly consistent set of occupational circumstances in the form of low-paid and insecure work, often performed by employees either without, or with all but legalistic access to health and safety protection and contractual rights. However, we were unable to identify a homogenised collective with clear boundaries (Gilmore et al., 2017; Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013), sharing predominantly negative work experiences or similar life-histories. Neither did we encounter members of a class (fully fledged or otherwise) who were attentive to far-right messages against a common enemy, or engaging in populist politics for the advancement of its own, non-mainstream (precariat) agenda. We found that despite the shared

precarity of their contexts (Standing, 2011; Savage et al., 2013), the level of cohesion across the three groups, as well as participant behaviours, attitudes and sense-making of individual contexts, differed. Importantly, the latter were more likely to be determined by the level of personalised, differentiated and deindividuated in-group cohesion than awareness of, and loyalty to a wider politico-economic framework such as the precariat.

Accordingly, members of the migrant group in our sample like Janush, adopted instrumental and satisficing attitudes towards their work (Katungi et al., 2006), regarding it as a means to an end, a solution to material problems and a financial opportunity not available in their home countries. As hypothesised by Miller and Brewer (1984:288-290) personalisation was demonstrated by greater distances between members of the in-group and divergence of goals, behaviours and attitudes as the category loses its salience. Thus, migrants were neither aware nor conformed to an identifiable in-group identity, let alone demonstrated membership to a class of discontented, alienated and insecure denizens (Standing, 2011; 2015). Consequently, using insights from Miller and Brewer's (1984) work, we propose that migrants' reasons for arriving in the UK, aspirations and life trajectories are too varied to be discussed under the common denominator of a precariat (Standing, 2014a; 2014b). Certainly, this did not mean that migrant workers in our sample were not precarious since our participants were able to access only the 'lousy' and low-paid jobs identified in the literature (Campbell and Price, 2016; Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2016). Nevertheless, we propose that migrant participants in the sample form personalised relationships on an ad-hoc basis, as required and facilitated by the given circumstances, which makes their categorisation as 'individualists' (Miller and Brewer, 1984:289), more suitable than any of the three precariat group

categories proposed by Standing (2014a; 2016). Migrant individualists interacted with various customers, fellow migrants and colleagues, yet those contacts were treated and engaged on an individual basis, rather than as members of a fully integrated, out-group category (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

In turn, Cleanwell employees operated within identifiable organisational structures and were aware of an in-group category to which they belonged. Nevertheless, cleaners exhibited differentiated (Miller and Brewer, 1984) attitudes and behaviours, identifying 'good' managers within a negatively-perceived Cleanwell out-group, and 'bad' Officers against a positively-viewed, Forces in-group. As proposed by Miller and Brewer (1984), differentiation is exemplified by some cohesion among in-group members but individual members can remain outside the normative influence of the in-group and reject dominant in-group attitudes or behaviours. However, passive negativity towards Cleanwell and respectful admiration for the Forces were not dynamics which matched the discontent, disenchantment, alienation, populist sympathising and right-wing leanings which Standing (2011; 2014a; 2014b; 2016) anticipates of some precariat groups. As a result, we suggest that it was the organisational context which influenced Cleanwell employees, both in terms of in-groups and out-groups, and not the assumed allegiance, or sharing of experiences and personal histories with a wider precariat about to take a united stand against oppressive and exploitative neoliberal structures. Differentiated in-groups enjoyed closer group-member distances than personalised groups, yet in-group salience was still low and presented a permeable boundary, allowing in-group members, like Participant 1, Squadron 1, to hold attitudes in opposition to the dominant in-group one.



Our study also enabled us to observe 'deindividuated' levels of in-group cohesion (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Miller and Brewer, 1984:287), that is, high in-group salience, which was manifest through the in-group's influencing of member attitudes and behaviours in the case of care workers. In our sample this was expressed by care workers who felt part of a 'family' yet, as in the case of Cleanwell workers, it was the organisational environment and vocational context which appeared to influence such categorisation, and our care participants were not brought into the fold of a wider precariat through shared experiences of alienation, exploitation and collective resistance. Rather, in-group coherence was achieved through the perceived usefulness and meaningfulness of care work and the presence of a 'family' of colleagues. Although care contexts differed, both adult care and childcare participants were able to achieve a sense of meaningful membership to a recognisable and professionally-validated in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The presence of two out-groups, namely, client families and the Government, further concretised the 'family' category boundary and aligned the attitudes of its members. First, the negative impact of Government was expressed through narratives berating the amount of 'paperwork', which appeared shorthand for all Government-imposed rules and procedures, and was similar to cleaner attitudes towards the Cleanwell out-group. Second, the treatment of client families as a homogenous out-group was observed through the generic reference to 'Mum' and 'Dad' and preference not to personalise family members through the use of names. As proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979; Miller and Brewer, 1984), this level of worker deindividuation and in-group category

salience made the existence of workers outside of the in-group unlikely so, whenever new workers did not 'fit' in either of the childcare or adult care organisations, they were either pushed-out, or chose to leave.

The above considerations enable us to empirically ground our position in the debate on whether there is sufficient unity of attitudes, shared experiences and behaviours within different precarious-work groups, as to support their collective treatment under a common, 'precariat' denominator. We believe that this is not yet the case. We were able to observe different levels of cohesion within the three sample groups of migrants, cleaners and care workers and, as a result, the salience not only of the precarious work context but the in-group category itself, varied. Specifically, attitudes and behaviours of migrants were of personalisation (Miller and Brewer, 1984) suggesting that their indiscriminate inclusion into an in-group, whether as nostalgics (Standing, 2014a; 2015) or otherwise is inappropriate. Instead, we suggest that research into migrant experiences of precarious work should focus on the individual contexts, motivations and personal goals of migrant workers.

There was awareness of an in-group category for Cleanwell workers, yet cleaners in our sample exhibited attitudes of differentiation, tending to regard 'Cleanwell' as a negatively-perceived out-group, while forming rapport with individual managers. In turn, the 'Forces' were admired and cleaners considered themselves part of the same in-group, while negatively differentiating against those individual Officers who were viewed as difficult and condescending. This made the organisational context and individual

relationships with colleagues and customers a more significant determinant of our cleaners' experiences than the objective terms and conditions of employment, perceived/actual alienation or disengagement with mainstream politics (Standing, 2014a; 2014b). Such a re-conceptualisation does not detract from the resentment some Cleanwell workers felt at having been displaced from permanent employment in the past, nor their acute awareness of current precarity. Rather, it acknowledges and reflects the nuanced and differentiated attitudes in our Cleanwell sample, moderated both by the particular organisational context and occupational in-groups.

Lastly, we heard narratives of enjoyment and fulfilment as a result of membership of meaningful, care-work in-groups as previously reported (Hebson et al., 2015; Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Svetlik et al., 2005). This was significant as it once again suggested that the organisational context, working environment and relationship with colleagues can mitigate the precarity of a worker's terms and conditions. Thus, membership to a cohesive and supportive, in-group 'family' enabled adult care and childcare workers to discover meaning and fulfilment in their roles, despite their low-pay, often labour intensive and insecure employment circumstances. Counter-intuitively, this 'family' identity was perhaps enabled by the precarity of the working context, since it made care work attractive only to those who shared similar values and regarded this line of work as a vocation and a personal calling. As a result, economic circumstances and political agendas (Standing, 2014a; 2014b) appeared a non-salient factor for in-group formation, attitudes and behaviours in our care-work sample. Adultcare workers like Amber, insisted they were 'happy' and 'content' in the present role and had no future plans to leave, whereas child

carer Ana could not see herself doing anything else, having wanted to do this type of work since she was eight years old.

## Conclusion

Our study presents an important insight into the experiences of workers placed inside the proposed 'precariat' class. Using Miller and Brewer's (1984) underutilised and SIT-inspired re-framing of Allport's Group Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) we were able to consider the salience of precariat framework, advanced in Guy Standing's seminal work on precarious work (Standing, 2011; 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2016) and taken-up in the literature (Savage et al., 2013; Pajnik, 2016; Armano et al., 2017). As a result, our study is able to make two, empirically-substantiated contributions to the broad subject of precarious work and the conceptualisation of the precariat, in particular.

First, we explore the theoretical validity of the precariat framework and are able to offer improved conceptualisation. Thus, we propose that the range and nuances of precarious group dynamics and differences in group cohesion make the proposed collectivisation of workers into a precariat problematic even at the level of the in-group, let alone as a class, be it one 'in-the-making' (Standing, 2011:15). Consequently, our study casts substantial doubt over whether there is an ongoing (Standing, 2011), or completed (Savage et al., 2013; Gilmore et al., 2017; Lea, 2013; Squires, 2013) collectivisation of workers into a precariat. Through an empirical study of three different

precarious groups, identified by Standing (2011) and Savage et al. (2013) as part of the precariat, we suggest that the cohesion of precarious workers into a precariat is not quite at a stage where it could, or should be accepted at face value. Workers do not become insecure simply through being placed in precarious conditions, and can positively reframe their contexts in the instance of differentiated and deindividuated in-group dynamics. In turn, although personalisation diminishes the salience of the in-group, it can also enable both positive and negative attitudes and experiences for personalised workers (migrants in our sample) (Allport, 1954; Miller and Brewer, 1984; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Second, we provide evidence of the reasons behind reported positive experiences in precarious work. Rather than dismissing them as only satisficing or instrumentality (Simon, 2013) we are able to demonstrate the continued impact of organizational contexts on the formation of meaningful and work-based in-groups. Positive experiences of precarious workers have already been observed in the narrower context of care work (Hebson et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2012) and we suggest that it is not just the opportunity to help and care for others that causes them, but the presence of a cohesive in-group identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), coalesced through the mutually reinforcing processes of deindividuation, and construction of identifiable out-groups (Miller and Brewer, 1984). Furthermore, narratives of workers in our sample suggest that precarious groups should not be dismissed as passive 'victims' of low pay and poor conditions. This points to the continued scope for worker agency, choice and fulfilment, as well as the lasting salience of organisational contexts, even in conditions of precarious work. Crucially, our

findings suggest that the multiple contextual insecurities that characterise precarity do not necessarily provide a seed-bed of shared experiences. As a result, this should perhaps lead us to differentiate between the *precarity* of labour market contexts, and the *precariousness* of worker experiences since collective orientations develop around much narrower social identities based on level of contact and alignment between the worker and his or her occupational in-group.

To take the literature further, future research should focus on individual sense-making, motivations, expectations and relationship-building carried-out by those in precarious work. Furthermore, it would be important to compare the experiences of workers in precarious, as well as non-precarious contexts, in order to study the degree of overlap and similarities between those nominally-separate (Standing, 2011) categories.

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